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ABSTRACT

To develop an appreciation and understanding of poetry in young children (K-3), grade school teachers should consider choosing poems that appeal to children and implement an enthusiastic instructional poetry program that can make a positive impact on the students. Recent comprehensive studies of young children's concepts and attitudes about poetry revealed the characteristics of content, element, and form preferred and least-preferred by children. Using these guidelines, trained raters evaluated 90 poems to determine which poems were most suitable for children. Based on the results of this study, 21 poems became the basis for the "Daily Oral Reading of Poetry" program. (A methodology and reading and writing activities for this poetry program are attached.) (KEH)

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Reaching the Heart:

Quality Poetry Instruction for Young Children

Michael Ford

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REACHING THE HEART: QUALITY POETRY INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

1989 Study Conference for the Association for Childhood Education International (Indianapolis, Indiana April 7, 1989)

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BACKGROUND: Developing an appreciation and understanding of poetry in children is a goal articulated throughout the elementary school experience. One only needs to examine the commercial materials, curricular guides, statements from professional organizations and opinions of educational authorities that shape and influence reading and language arts instruction to find widespread evidence of this goal. The worthiness of the goal is defensible on two fronts. First because of the unique way this genre is crafted and presented, poetry needs to be studied for poetry' sake. Literary experiences possible through exposure to poetry are not accessible to students fed a steady diet of prose. Secondly, poetry is being increasingly recognized as a valuable tool to lead students toward other learning about themselves, their language and their world.

Unfortunately, the schools have fallen short of achieving this very worthy goal. Surveys indicate that less than one percent of the adult population reads poetry on a regular basis. Despite the fact that many young children enter school with a positive attitude toward poetry activities, they often leave school without developing a mature understanding or a longterm appreciation for this unique genre.

The purpose of this presentation is to assist teachers as they develop effective instructional poetry programs to use in their classrooms. They will become familiar with the results of a recent comprehensive study of young children's concepts and attitudes about poetry. Insights from this research can assist teachers as they develop appropriate instructional poetry programs. They will also become familiar with a successfully field-tested instructional poetry program called The Daily Oral Reading of Poetry. This program requires a minimum amount of teacher training, planning time and implementation concerns yet yielded significant results in improving children's concepts and attitudes about poetry. (Results are described in the 1987 dissertation Young Children's Concepts and Attitudes about Poetry by Dr. Ford, which is available for loan from the University of Iowa.)

THREE CRITICIAL COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE POETRY INSTRUCTION:

THE POEMS: Research reveals that teachers' choices of poems often do not correlate well with the choices of children. Extensive poetry preference research has been done with elementary students which provides guidelines for assisting teachers in choosing poems that will appeal to their students. The following is a summary of that research:

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Characteristics preferred:

CONTENT -- themes important to children; favorite specific topics -- animals, holidays, childhood experiences; plot and action-filled; familiar topics; humor and nonsense.
ELEMENTS -- rhymed verse, definite rhythm, sharp sensory images, sense of physical movement.
FORM -- limericks, narratives, nursery rhyme format; appropriate length; contemporary.

Characteristics least preferred:

CONTENT -- mature, serious, disturbing themes; abstract topics; talky poems; unfamiliar topics; perceived as dull or boring.
ELEMENTS -- unrhymed verse; lack of rhymic variety; little creative use of sound; figurative language, abstract, symbolic images; little sense of physical movement.
FORM -- haiku, lyric; too long, too short; datedness.

Using these guidelines, trained raters evaluated ninety poems and the following poems were found to be the most suitable for young children (K-3) [on a scale of 0-20 all of these poems were rated 17 or higher indicating they contained many or most of the preferred characteristics]:

Spaghetti (Silverstein)*
Miss Hocket (Anonymous limerick)*
The Creature in the Classroom (Prelutsky)*
Don't Ever Cross a Crocodile (Starbird)*
The Crocodile's Toothache (Silverstein)*
Rhinocerous Stew (Luton)*
Me-Stew (Silverstein)*
Pumberly Pott's Unpredictable Niece (Prelutsky)*
Dreadful (Silverstein)*
The Spangled Pandemonium (Brown)*
The Wozzit (Prelutsky)*
My Dinosaur's Day in the Park (Winthrop)*
Messy Room (Silverstein)*
Herbert Glerbett (Prelutsky)*
There was an Old Lady (Lee)*
Fancy Dive (Silverstein)*
Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout (Silverstein)*
Twickham Tweer (Prelutsky)*
Sick (Silverstein)*
The Yipiyuk (Silverstein)*
Boa Constrictor (Silverstein)*
Captain Hook (Silverstein)
The Monster in my Closet (Winthrop)
Mother Doesn't Want a Dog (Viorst)
Peanut-Butter Sandwich (Silverstein)
The Monster's Pet (Moore)

*These twenty-one poems became the basis for the Daily Oral Reading of Poetry program.

THE METHODOLOGY: A review of descriptive literature related to poetry instruction reveals the following recommendations:

1. Students need to be exposed to poetry on a daily basis.
2. Oral reading of appropriate poems by teachers is one of the best ways to expose children to poetry.
3. In the beginning, an emphasis should be placed on aesthetic enjoyment of the poems instead of academic analysis of the poems.
4. The terminology related to poetry should be used when poems are being shared. Many young children are not even familiar with the terms "poem," poet," and "poetry."
5. The poem should be the primary focus of the poetry experience.
6. Teachers should avoid many practices which are often used but tend to be linked with negative attitudes about poetry (forced memorization, endless questioning, required performance, assigned readings, overuse in one setting, isolated units, etc.)

The Daily Oral Reading of Poetry program was structured so that teachers introduced one new poem on a daily basis for four weeks according to the following basic lesson format:

1. Prior to the lesson, review the poem and practice reading it aloud.
2. Secure a quiet large group setting to share the poem.
3. After gaining the attention of the children, set up the poem using a simple listening set.
4. Introduce the poem using the title and the poet's name. Be sure to use terms like poem, poetry and poet.
5. Orally share the poem with enthusiasm and expression.
6. Following the poem, use an appropriate follow-up activity. Let children's reactions guide your follow-up to the reading.
7. As possible reread the selection, as well as other favorite poems already introduced, to the children.

Teachers were encouraged to incorporate the poetry reading into an already existing daily routine such as opening activities or oral literature. Lessons usually lasted between five or ten minutes. After four weeks of conducting the pilot program, significant gains were noticed in the young children's concepts and attitudes about poetry.

Twenty-one lessons structured according to these guidelines, using the poems previously identified, are contained in the Daily Oral Reading of Poetry Program Teacher's Manual.

THE TEACHER: The descriptive literature related to the teacher's role in poetry instruction reveals one very critical fact -- a single teacher may be able to leave a longterm impression on how a child feels about poetry. Unfortunately, that influence can be both positive and negative. If a teacher is armed with appropriate poems and an educationally sound methodology, then the remaining ingredient they need is enthusiasm for poetry.

THE KEY TO IMPACTING POSITIVELY ON STUDENTS' CONCEPTS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT POETRY IS DAILY EXPOSURE TO GOOD POEMS FROM AN ENTHUSIASTIC TEACHER!

Linking Poems to Reading and Writing Activities

1) Recall Activities: Many poems contain lists of items and events. Students might enjoy trying to recall all the various things that were described in a poem.

2) Sequencing Activities: Once lists of things or events from a poem have been identified, students can work to put them in order practicing their sequencing abilities.

3) Brainstorming new verses fitting the poem's pattern: After assisting students to identify patterns in certain poems, encourage them to come up with other examples that could have happened in the poem based on this pattern.

4) Creating new verse changing the poem's pattern: Students can also be encouraged to alter the pattern from one poem to establish a new pattern for additional brainstorming and writing activities.

5) Choral and echo reading: The unison effect of having all students read parts of a poem together chorally or the modeling effect of having students echo parts of the poem read aloud are two good ways to provide students with oral fluency practice without all the risks of other oral reading situations.

6) Repeated reading techniques: Poems can become the focus of repeated reading activities as described by Samuels. The rhythm, rhyme and repetition built into poetry may be more effective in assisting students improve their fluency

7) Discussing interesting vocabulary words: The rich language of poems provides a meaningful context for discussing a variety of interesting words with students.

8) Progressive Cloze activities: Using part of a familiar poem written on a chalkboard or written out on individual word cards, gradually remove words from the view of the students. Have them continue to recite the full poem even with words missing. By directing their attention to words left for viewing, a teacher can provide students with repeated exposure to key sight words.

9) Reconstructing the poem using mixed up individual word cards based on the text from the poem: Putting the individual words contained in phrases and sentences together so that they make sense is a good way for students to practice cohesion comprehension.

10) Story mapping techniques applied to narrative poems: A familiar narrative poem is a good tool for introducing students to strategies involving the use of story mapping.

11) Self-illustrated books with a line of verse on each page: By taking a short piece of verse language from a poem, song or fingerplay; teachers can help students create "instant readers." Put one line of text from the verse on the bottom of a blank sheet of paper. Have students draw a picture that goes along with the text. Staple the pages together with a cover and you've created a book students can read instantly.

12) Illustrating story wheels constructed to accompany a narrative poem: Using a circle divided into an appropriate number of "pie sections," have students read each stanza from a longer narrative poem and create a picture that goes with that part of the poem. Keep doing that throughout the poem and when students are done they will have a circle filled with images from the poem. It's a good way to help them practice the imagery skills that are needed for comprehension of text without pictures.